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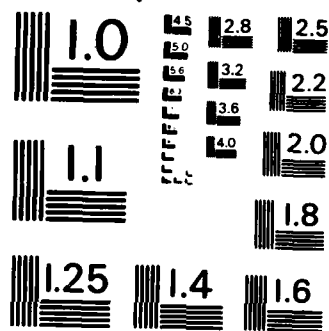
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**U.S.-SOVIET NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL:
WHERE WE ARE AND HOW WE GOT THERE**

by **Strobe Talbott**

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U.S.-SOVIET NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL: WHERE WE ARE AND HOW WE GOT THERE

Strobe Talbott*

When the Reagan Administration came into office, the history of nuclear arms control was at a turning point. That was partly because of the situation that the new Administration inherited. But it was also because of who the Administration was. A group of people who had been unrelentingly critical of arms control from outside the Executive Branch found themselves suddenly on the inside, with the power to translate their long-standing disapproval into the basis for a new set of American objectives and policies. Those people faced a complicated mixture of opportunities and risks. As it turned out, they sometimes mistook one for the other.

Eager as they may have been to go back to square one, they were encumbered with a number of legacies from the past. One was a package of agreements that was already in danger of coming unwound: the 1979 SALT II Treaty, informally observed but unratified and, from the Administration's standpoint, unratifiable; the 1972 SALT I Interim Agreement on Offensive Weapons, expired already four years earlier; and the SALT I Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, still in force but losing its rationale the longer it continued in the absence of formal, effective limitations on offensive weaponry.

Aside from the parlous state of strategic arms control, there was the even more problematic and unpromising enterprise of intermediate-range arms control. NATO's dual-track decision of December 1979 was a commitment on behalf of the alliance to prepare to deploy 572 new missiles in Europe by 1983 while the U.S. sought simultaneously to negotiate, before that date, an agreement redressing the nuclear imbalance in Europe so that perhaps the full NATO deployment would not, in the end, be deemed necessary.

*The author is Washington Bureau Chief of *Time*. This paper is a revised version of a presentation at a seminar sponsored by the Rand/UCLA Center for the Study of Soviet International Behavior, Santa Monica, California, September 20, 1984.

This arrangement left the Reagan Administration under a triple disadvantage in what came to be called INF: first, the U.S. would be negotiating against a deadline, never a good idea; second, it would be trying to trade undeployed, indeed incompletely developed, American weapons against already-deployed Soviet ones; and finally, the prospective American deployments were to take place on the territory of third countries--allies, to be sure, but sovereign democracies with high anxieties and deep ambivalence about whether the new American missiles represented protection or provocation.

Thus, no matter who had been inaugurated President in January 1981, and no matter whom he would have assembled around him as his national-security team, he would have had an extremely difficult time as he set about to conduct nuclear arms control with the U.S.S.R. The Administration grappled with that problem for nearly two years, until late 1983, when the Soviet leadership withdrew from both the INF talks and START, bringing nuclear arms control to the most serious and protracted impasse it had faced in a generation.

That impasse arose in large measure as a consequence of Soviet policy--and in large measure because INF came, in a very negative way, to overshadow, or contaminate, strategic arms control. Any post mortem of the two years between 1981 and 1983 must identify as one of the central obstacles to progress the Kremlin's position, staked out early and held to steadfastly, that no new American deployments whatsoever were permissible in Europe. The Soviets' refusal to budge from that position contributed directly and centrally to the breakdown of both INF and START; the walkouts from both occurred immediately after the arrival of the first American missiles in West Germany, and with certain cryptic hedges and fudges along the way, the Soviet line for the past year has been a refusal to resume either negotiation unless and until the offending American weapons are removed.

It is arguable that because of the uncompromising all-or-nothing Soviet position in INF, there was never any chance for arms control during the Reagan Administration. That is not, however, the only interpretation of what went wrong, and why, and whose responsibility it was. There is a case to be made that the Administration's conduct of

its own side of the negotiations also contributed to the breakdown. Both in the proposals that it put forward and the way in which it followed up on those proposals in the negotiations, the Reagan Administration confronted the Soviet leadership with definitions of the problem--and with solutions to that problem--that the Russians could not possibly accept.

The underlying American premises were every bit as unacceptable to the Soviets as their denial of our right to station new weapons in Europe was unacceptable to us. A vicious cycle developed; Soviet and American intransigence fed off of each other. To make matters worse, this vicious cycle spun faster and faster in an overall political atmosphere that was highly unconducive to progress. And that made for yet another vicious cycle: the mutual recrimination in the arena of arms control exacerbated tensions in the relationship more generally, and vice versa.

The Reagan Administration's position in INF and START was based on not just one proposition, but a logical chain of seven of them:

- First, the United States was militarily inferior to the Soviet Union--not just in one region of the world or in one category of weaponry, but across the board.
- Second, arms control as practiced in the past had contributed to American military inferiority and, if continued, would have locked the U.S. permanently into second place.
- Third, because the U.S. was behind and because arms control was partly to blame, the best course was to suspend bilateral bargaining and concentrate on a unilateral American rearmament.
- Fourth, if forced by political expediency to engage in bilateral arms control, the U.S. must find a way of pursuing a unilateral arms buildup simultaneously.
- Fifth, in order to be meaningful and salutary, arms control must feature reductions, the deeper the better.
- Sixth, numerical reductions on the American side should be consistent with the modernization plans for our defense programs. In other words, fewer total weapons, perhaps, but plenty of new types of weapons.

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- Seventh and finally, in applying the desideratum of reductions to the Soviet Union, the United States must insist on drastic cutbacks in the most modern, potent Soviet weapons already deployed. Arms control must result in nothing less than a top-to-bottom overhaul of the Soviet arsenal, and thus accomplish changes in the nuclear balance that the United States has not been able to bring about by dint of its own defense programs.

While there is room for debate over those premises on our side, there was never much debate on the Soviet side. The Soviets simply would not accept either those American propositions or the American INF and START proposals and modifications of proposals which stemmed from those propositions. There was an essence of non-negotiability in the American conduct of INF and START from the beginning.

That non-negotiability was embodied in the Zero Option proposal, which required that the Soviets dismantle their entire SS-20 force, throughout the U.S.S.R., in exchange for the U.S.'s cancelling deployment of its prospective new missiles in Europe; and it was embodied in the START initiative that the President unveiled at Eureka College in May 1982, which required that the Soviets give up most of their latest ICBMs in exchange for the U.S.'s scaling back some of its future programs, particularly in SLBMs.

To be sure, there is nothing unusual or unreasonable about an opening position that proposes more than one expects to attain in a final agreement. But when a side makes a maximalist and fanciful opening bid it has, willy-nilly, inhibited its own freedom of movement in the negotiation; it has defined its problem in a way that defies solution. Even when it goes to its fallbacks and makes its concessions, its new position is likely to be reasonable only when compared to its opening one, and mutually acceptable compromise will still probably be far out of reach.

Throughout the debate over the Reagan Administration's conduct of arms control, there has been a question of how much genuine flexibility the Reagan Administration showed in the course of INF and START. The answer is that there was more movement from a non-negotiable opening

position to a possible basis for fruitful negotiation in INF than in START.

In INF, the Administration early on chose the Defense Department's Zero Option over a State Department alternative that would have traded off reductions (as opposed to cancellation) in the NATO modernization program for reductions (as opposed to cancellation) in the Soviet SS-20 force. Whatever can be said for the Zero Option as an opening ploy, the U.S. surely stuck with it for much too long. As frequently, if not publicly, acknowledged by Administration officials, the principal purpose of the U.S. negotiating posture in Geneva was not so much to get an agreement as to shore up the willingness of our allies to accept the new American missiles. That political--or, as it was sometimes called, alliance-management--purpose of the INF exercise suffered from the total lack of promise and plausibility in the Zero Option.

One day in July 1982, the two chief negotiators in Geneva wandered off for their famous walk in the woods and agreed on a way to break the impasse. There would have been major concessions on each side's part. The U.S. would have given up what the Soviets regarded as the most threatening new missile system, the ballistic Pershing II which was to be based in Germany, and the Soviets would have accepted the deployment of a scaled-down package of cruise missiles.

In the end, the Reagan Administration repudiated the notion of sacrificing the Pershing II, and the Kremlin repudiated the notion of accepting any new American weapons at all. We will never know what other outcome the episode might have had from the one it did, but the walk in the woods affair suggests that there may have been cracks in the Soviet stone wall. The timing was important. Leonid Brezhnev was still alive and perhaps eager for a last-hurrah summit. In any event, by the time of the Soviet walkout in November 1983, the Administration had finally itself abandoned the Zero Option and adopted the State Department's originally preferred approach.

But for a variety of reasons, it was too late. One reason it was too late is that the Soviets were settling into a long siege of intransigence across a broad front in arms control and East-West relations more generally. And one reason they were doing that was because the Administration's conduct of strategic arms control had

itself become not just an obstacle to progress, but a contributing factor to the overall deterioration.

In START, an American arms-control proposal was seen by the Soviets as a hostile and pernicious act. The President's initial proposal as put forward at Eureka College was breathtaking in what it would have required the Soviets to do to the Strategic Rocket Forces: of their three most formidable types of multiple-warhead ICBMs, two would have to be reduced in number by two-thirds, while the third would have to be eliminated altogether; similarly, the number of strategic ballistic missile launchers would have to be reduced by about two-thirds, as would the number of land-based strategic ballistic warheads, and another two-thirds reduction would be stipulated in total strategic ballistic missile throw-weight, a measurement of destructive capability and potential by which the U.S.S.R. has traditionally been far ahead of the U.S. because of the Soviet predilection for much larger rocket boosters and a less diversified force structure.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the Eureka proposal would have required the Soviet Union virtually to dismantle the centerpieces of its nuclear arsenal. Moreover, the numbers were carefully designed in a way that would force very little in the way of adjustment in U.S. forces; rather, the numbers were tailored to fit the American strategic modernization program, particularly the MX ICBM and the D-5 SLBM systems.

There were, subsequently, adjustments in the U.S. position, but few of them had the effect of making the package more negotiable. For example, cruise missiles potentially represented a very real trade-bait or bargaining chips, but they were never really utilized as such. After initially keeping cruise missiles off the table altogether, the Administration eventually stated its willingness to accept limitations on the air-launched variety, but this was hardly a major concession, since limitations on ALCMs were already part of SALT II. Sea-launched cruise missiles never did become negotiable from the American standpoint.

Another example of what was advertised at the time, and since, as proof of American flexibility was an offer to raise the ceiling on launchers, or deployed missiles. But that was really an accommodating

gesture aimed at MX opponents and Midgetman enthusiasts here in the U.S., not at the Soviets in Geneva.

A more significant change was the U.S.'s statement of willingness in the summer of 1983 to relax the sublimit on ICBM warheads and the so-called collateral restraints on specific categories of Soviet ICBMs. But while numbers were raised and altered, the accompanying words made clear that, one way or another, most of the big Soviet missiles had to go as part of an agreement.

As time went on, the Administration adjusted its position in a way that seemed cryptic and ambiguous, therefore highly suspicious. The American proposal began to look like a Chinese restaurant menu. In effect, instead of being offered a new proposal, the Soviet Union was being offered *options*, not unlike those that were being considered within the Administration itself.

This is a rather strange way to do business in a negotiation, but it can be explained easily enough: the Administration was unable to make up its own collective mind over options and alternative approaches preferred by the various U.S. government agencies. So the policymakers repackaged those alternative approaches somewhat and passed them along to the Russians, who were, (a) somewhat confused about what the real American position was, and (b) quite certain that insofar as they could figure out the choices they were being offered, they did not like any of them, since all of them boiled down to different formulas for dictating massive reductions in the Soviet arsenal.

When the double build-down scheme, favored by key members of the Scowcroft Commission and members of Congress, was added to column A of the Chinese menu, the Soviets seemed to find that equally unappetizing. The scheme--in which The Rand Corporation can feel some pride of authorship¹--was a conceptual, technical and strategic thing of beauty, not to mention of great complexity. It would provide for tradeoffs between different categories of weapons, such as cruise missiles for ballistic missile warheads; it would deal with the problem of

¹ Glenn Kent and Ted Warner of Rand's Washington office were instrumental in the formulation of the double build-down, a plan that called for phased reductions in two categories: ballistic missile warheads and another, more complicated index of destructive capability that subsumed warheads on missiles and weapons on bombers.

disparities in throw-weight without making throw-weight *per se* a unit of account, and it would, if put into effect, induce the evolution of the arsenals on both sides in a direction of greater arms-race stability and deterrent stability.

The double build-down had everything going for it except that it was, like almost every other attempt to improve on START, unrealistic in the demands it would make on the existing and prospective Soviet program. At least it was unrealistic as a new concept for strategic arms control that the U.S.S.R. could be expected to accept immediately. Perhaps Soviet planners and policymakers might, over time and with negotiated refinements in the scheme, come eventually to accept double build-down. But as a radically new and radically consequential afterthought to the U.S. START proposal put forward at the 11th hour and 59th minute in Geneva, it did not stand a chance.

Aside from the substance and merits of the plan, the way in which it came about is extremely significant. The double build-down became the adopted child of three sets of parents: the proponents of the older, simpler build-down in the Senate, led by Sam Nunn and William Cohen; the Midgetman lobby in the House; and the Scowcroft Commission. These three constituencies--whose support the Administration desperately needed for the MX and other military programs--closed ranks around the double build-down and, utilizing their considerable leverage, imposed it on the Administration. The Administration rather reluctantly and ambiguously added it to the U.S. proposal in Geneva.

It was an extraordinary episode, an apotheosis of congressional intervention in the Executive Branch's conduct of arms-control policy; and it came about basically because there was an almost complete breakdown in congressional confidence in what the Administration was doing. There was a kind of poetic justice to the affair. The Administration had dragged its feet from the beginning on arms control, moving forward only when under irresistible political pressure to do so. The INF Zero Option came about largely in response to pressure from the West European allies, and the Eureka START proposal came about largely because the White House learned that two movements were getting started on Capitol Hill: one to kill the MX, and the other to mandate a nuclear freeze. The Administration suddenly, and very belatedly, got its act together on START as a way of heading off both those movements.

The negotiations in Geneva were only one of a number of negotiations taking place with regard to START. The really intense negotiating was going on within the Administration, primarily between the State and Defense Departments, but eventually between the Executive and Legislative Branches as well. There is nothing new, of course, about bureaucratic politics and politics more generally conspiring to complicate the conduct of American arms control. But to an unprecedented extent, these forces have been disruptive and often paralyzing in the Reagan Administration.

There are two main reasons why this has been true: one has to do with the leadership style of the President himself; the other with the depth of what I would call ideological divisions within the Administration, and the President's inability, to date, to resolve those divisions.

It is now a well-known fact--harped on by his critics and conceded by his supporters--that President Reagan is neither terribly interested in, nor terribly knowledgeable about, the substance of arms control. He delegates. The principal cabinet secretaries to whom he delegates have also been somewhat disengaged from the nitty-gritty questions. They, in turn, have delegated to their assistants, who have been very much engaged in the policy-making process and very much at loggerheads with each other. Throughout much of the period in question, the National Security Council staff was in the business largely of trying to cobble together jury-rigged, multi-tiered compromises between the competing agency positions. Yet those agency positions were, and remained, very far apart and, in some fundamental respects, incompatible. As a result, the supposed synthesis of competing positions ultimately endorsed by the President was more often than not either hopelessly cumbersome or a disguised decision to stand pat.

As a general rule, the State Department and its allies elsewhere in the government have tended toward the traditional view that arms control is an appropriate component of national-security policy, that sound agreements are useful to the nation's diplomacy and defense alike, that such agreements can serve to bound the Soviet military threat, favorably influence the atmosphere of Soviet-American political relations, allay

the anxieties and materially improve the security of our allies, and reassure the American Congress and public, as they so obviously want to be reassured, that our leadership is capable of sitting down with the Russians even as it stands up to them.

Thus, while the word "negotiability" became something of a taboo early on in the Administration, the State Department quickly found various euphemisms to use in arguing for initiatives and adjustments that might eventually lead to agreement.

By contrast, the prevailing view at the Pentagon--and that means primarily civilian, politically appointed leadership of the Office of the Secretary of Defense--has been deeply mistrustful of the arms-control process. In much of what has been said and done by that sector of the government, there is the strong implication that no realistically achievable agreement would be in the national interest. There have been numerous statements to the effect that arms control is a soporific that undermines the American will to stand up to the Russians. But more importantly, the Pentagon civilians' purposes can be deduced from the nature of the positions that they so vigorously advanced and so staunchly defended over the past three and half years.

One cannot, on the basis of mind-reading, be certain about people's motivations, but one can certainly see the effect of those positions, and the effect has almost always been to stymie negotiation and preclude agreement in every forum--not just with the Soviets in Geneva, but within the U.S. government as well.

What next? Can the arms-control process be revived? There are grounds for cautious optimism. The U.S. still has considerable leverage over the Soviet Union, and Reagan, now that he has been re-elected, may take advantage of that leverage. He has said on numerous occasions that he feels his Administration, in its first term, met the prerequisites he set for diplomacy: the U.S., he believes, is now well on the way to rearmament; it is "standing tall;" the Soviets have "gotten the message." He has also expressed a desire to build an edifice of statesmanship on the foundation of rearmament he feels he laid in the first term, and to leave a legacy in the form of an improvement in Soviet-American relations and, more specifically, a major arms control agreement.

Also, the Administration seems to now realize, in a way that it did not before, that the arms-control process is essential to sustain an arms buildup. Earlier, it was aware only of the converse of that proposition.

The Soviets, too, may be ready to buckle down to serious negotiations. Now that they face the fact of a second Reagan Administration, they may find it harder to procrastinate in acting on the many incentives on which they have to come to terms with the U.S. The Kremlin is beset by the economic and systemic troubles of the U.S.S.R. itself, the many challenges to Soviet power within the confines of the Empire, and the growing sense--occasionally voiced in cautious, oblique terms by the Soviet leaders themselves--that the U.S.S.R. is overextended in the Third World.

Moreover, the prospect of a wide array of new, high-technology American weapons systems--such as cruise missiles, the MX, D-5, Stealth, and the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI)--could portend a period when the bargaining relationship is shifting in favor of the U.S.

All this means that the U.S. will, in the coming months, have a very real opportunity to start again. The President seems genuinely eager to do that. He does not, however, seem yet to know how. On the eve of his re-election, the impacted bureaucratic and ideological disputes were still there; the propensity of the NSC staff to broker half-a-loaf compromises was as deeply embedded as ever.

On no issue are the battle lines likely to be more sharply drawn than over Star Wars, with one camp trying to use SDI as genuine bargaining leverage in arms control--that is, something truly available for limitation if not elimination in exchange for the right, realistic Soviet concessions, and the other camp treating SDI as the ultimate "family jewel," to be protected at all costs against arms control.

There is also almost certain to be a bitter fight over interim restraints--whether to keep the expired SALT I and II limits on offensive weaponry in place beyond what would have been the expiration of SALT II at the end of 1985--and over Soviet compliance with those and other past agreements. The two issues are closely related. Opponents of continuing interim restraints will make the most of evidence that the Soviets have violated the spirit if not the letter of agreements.

Another contentious matter is whether there can and should be some sort of quick-fix or stop-gap solution in the short term, a Vladivostok-type holding action, that would, necessarily, be relatively modest in its impact on weapons programs, sketchy in some of its important details, and at least superficially similar to SALT.

The Pentagon civilians and their allies have fought, and will probably continue to fight, tooth and nail against what they see as a retreat to the bad old days of SALT. For their part, the State Department and its allies have been quietly and so far unsuccessfully pressing for exactly such a compromise not just with the Russians, but with the past.

An interim agreement might serve as a means of shoring up the steadily eroding structure of SALT and other past agreements and as a means of buying time for the inevitably lengthy negotiation required to produce a more ambitious and comprehensive agreement--perhaps something along the lines of the double build-down scheme favored by a broad coalition of congressman and by the Scowcroft Commission.

The State Department's plan is the so-called "new framework for START," which would entail a SALT-like hierarchy of ceilings on strategic launchers, subsuming in a separate category bombers, and a parallel hierarchy of ceilings on weapons or warheads, subsuming gravity bombs and cruise missiles. It represents an attempt to put together the common denominators of SALT II, the Soviet proposal in START, and some of the more achievable goals of the U.S. proposal in START.

There have been some telltale hints--nothing committal or official, to be sure--that something like the framework approach might engage the Soviets sufficiently for them to back off their insistence on the withdrawal of the initially deployed Euromissile as a precondition for the resumption of strategic negotiations. Should this occur, the superpowers would be talking again; the long hiatus would be over; and there are those of who believe that that, in itself, would be something. It would not be everything, but it would be better than nothing.

However, as critics of arms control right, left and center have frequently pointed out, talking, in and of itself, is not necessarily productive or salutary: to wit, the period between 1981 and late 1983.

The two sides talked a great deal, but they talked themselves into corners, and they talked past each other. On the American side, there was constant and ultimately unresolved bickering over what it is that they should be talking about.

While one can be optimistic to the point of seeing a possibility of negotiations resuming between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., one must also recognize the danger that those other negotiations, the intramural ones within the U.S. government will continue to no avail, focused on such old issues as the real negotiability of cruise missiles, but also on the new and potentially crucial issue of the negotiability of strategic defenses. That is the single most interesting and important question that looms at the outset of the next chapter in the history of arms control--if there is to be one.

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